

The 1950 Censuses—

How They Were Taken

Procedural Studies of the 1950 Censuses, No. 2

Population, Housing, Agriculture, Irrigation, Drainage



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FOREWORD

At ten-year intervals the Government of the United States, through the Bureau of the Census, takes a complete inventory of its population and of its homes and farms. In similar fashion other inventories of manufacturing plants, mines, and service and trade establishments are taken at periodic intervals. These inventories, known as Censuses, are an important part of the work of the United States Government, since they provide the basic facts necessary for understanding and solving many public problems.

The censuses which enumerate and describe the nation's resources are large-scale undertakings. The 1950 Censuses involved visits to 45 million homes to get information on more than 150 million people and their dwellings as well as on more than five million farms. The total cost of this work was over 90 million dollars. More than 160 thousand people were involved in carrying out this program.

The experience in this activity has been summarized in this report to provide a public record of how the job was done. Such a record, even though condensed, is extremely important so that all who participated in any phase of the work or make use of the figures may have comprehensive understanding of the way in which the Censuses were taken. What could be a simple count in a small village becomes a highly complex operation when all the villages and cities, as well as the open country, are included. Millions of schedules and hundreds of millions of punch cards must be handled in such a manner that each person, house, or farm is counted in the right geographic area. Careful attention must be given to each step of the operation so that the relationships among the various items of information are properly shown for each area.

Although the Census Bureau has long specialized in handling the complexities of large-scale statistical operations, it has not always taken effective steps to insure that the experience gained in one census is fully utilized in planning the next one. This report is intended to cover all parts of the 1950 experience in order to assist in developing plans for the 1960 Censuses.

Census taking is a major national activity in many parts of the world. Increasingly attention has been focused on arranging for international comparability in census statistics. This record of procedures used in our 1950 Census is expected to be helpful to those taking Censuses in other countries in suggesting procedures adapted to their situation. Similarly, it is expected that comparable reports issued by the census authorities of other countries will prove of value in the formulation of our own census plans, as well as in our interpretation of the data provided by their censuses.

This report will also serve to meet the obligation of a statistical agency like the Bureau of the Census to provide its users with a full set of facts concerning the manner in which the information was collected and processed. Such information is invaluable in interpreting the census results and in suggesting uses, as well as limitations on the uses, of the data. It may also lead to suggestions from users which will be helpful in planning the next censuses.

For a full understanding of the various aspects of the census, there should be a comprehensive statement of the reasons for the methods used and an evaluation of the decisions made, in addition to the brief descriptions given in this report. Such evaluations, however, would have greatly increased the size of this report. Perhaps the most significant materials contributing to an evaluation of the procedures used in the censuses are those reflecting the quality of the data collected and published. Some of the Bureau's findings concerning the quality of the data have already appeared in the census reports. Additional findings are to be included in a report now in preparation which will present the results of an intensive quality check of the 1950 Censuses.

No report, however, can expect to answer all the questions that takers of Censuses elsewhere and careful users may wish to raise. To the extent that the Bureau has additional information, it will be glad to provide available detail to persons interested in pursuing particular questions.



Robert W. Burgess
Director
Bureau of the Census

June 30, 1955



*"It's OK Boys. You can tell him everything...
He's the Census Man!"*

You're right, Rafel! The Census-Taker hasn't got any connection with the "Revenooers." Anything anybody tells him is strictly confidential. By law, Census facts and figures can't be shown to the tax people, the police, or anybody else.

Everything the Census-Taker asks is important to you and your family. Your answers will help leaders in industry, business, labor and civic groups to plan such things as better schools, better roads, better housing; better distribution of such services as telephones, gas, water, and electricity.

What's more, if you want to have a voice in the government you have to be counted in the Census. According to the Constitution, the number of Representatives your state is entitled to send to Congress is determined by the Census taken every ten years.

The Census man will come around to your house some time after April 1. Be ready to answer all his questions accurately, and honestly, and *quickly*. (Remember, it's a big job to count upwards of a hundred and fifty million noses!)

WHAT TO DO WHEN THE CENSUS-TAKER COMES

1. Ask him to show his official card. This identifies him as an employee of the Census Bureau.
2. Be friendly. Invite him in. He will stay only a few minutes.
3. In non-English-speaking homes, have an adult or older child ready to translate.
4. Answer all questions accurately and honestly. Remember—the information you give is strictly confidential. Under law, it is not available to any individual or any other Government agency.



Radio and newspapers will do their best to tell you beforehand what most of the questions are. Watch for them and have your answers ready.



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CONTENTS

PART I. THE CENSUS OPERATION

	Page		Page
Introduction.....	1	The Enumerator's Job.....	19
Chapter I. Preparing for the Enumeration.....	1	Population.....	19
Legal Authority for the 1950 Censuses.....	1	Housing.....	20
The Bureau Organization.....	2	Agriculture.....	20
Executive Staff.....		Irrigation.....	21
Divisions.....		Drainage.....	21
The Seventeenth Decennial Census Committee.....		Reports and Field Controls.....	22
Size of Staff.....		General Program.....	22
Financing the Censuses.....	3	Time-Records Program in 40 District Offices.....	22
Choosing the Questions.....	3	Special Controls on Coverage.....	23
Staff Members.....	4	'T-Night'.....	23
Consultants.....	4	Checks by Crew Leaders.....	23
Technical Advisory Committees.....	4	Apartment House Lists.....	23
American Statistical Association Advisory Committee.....	4	Large Farm Lists.....	23
Special Committees.....	5	Consecutive Numbering of Dwelling Units.....	23
Pretests of Questionnaires.....	5	Callback Record.....	23
Testing Field and Control Procedures.....	5	Dwelling Unit Control Lists.....	24
Special Enumerations.....	5	Missed Persons Form.....	24
Agriculture Surveys.....	5	Local Announcements.....	24
Survey of Residential Financing.....	5	Other Field Enumerations.....	24
Post-Enumeration Survey.....	5	Post-Enumeration Survey.....	24
Experimental Areas.....	5	Survey of Residential Financing.....	24
The Sampling Plan.....	5	Local Housing Authority Survey.....	24
Population 20-Percent Sample.....	7	Chapter V. Steps Preliminary to Processing.....	25
Population 3 1/3-Percent Sample.....	7	Field Review and Checking.....	25
Housing 20-Percent Sample.....	7	Shipping the Portfolios.....	25
Agriculture Sample.....	7	Receiving the Portfolios.....	26
Survey of Residential Financing.....	8	Special Projects.....	26
Post-Enumeration Survey.....	8	Post-Enumeration Survey Transcription.....	26
Informing the Public.....	8	CPS-Census Match.....	26
Chapter II. Defining Geographic Areas.....	9	Urban Redevelopment Transcription.....	26
Maps and Political Boundaries.....	9	Preliminary Sample Transcription.....	26
Urbanized Areas.....	10	Organizing Work Units.....	26
Unincorporated Places.....	10	Follow-up Problems in the Field.....	27
Urban-Rural Classification Changes.....	10	Handling Supplemental Population Forms.....	27
Minor Civil Division Lists.....	10	Military Individual Census Reports.....	27
Census Tracts.....	10	Crews of Vessels Reports.....	27
Census County Divisions in the State of Washington.....	11	Confidential Reports on Income, Individual Census Re- ports, and Missed Persons Forms.....	27
Blocks in Cities With 50,000 or More Inhabitants.....	11	Infant Cards.....	27
Special Coverage Problems.....	11	Correction Sheets.....	28
Defense Installations.....	11	Final State Population Counts.....	28
Institutions.....	11	Review of Field Count.....	28
Hotels and Apartment Buildings.....	11	Additions to Field Count.....	28
Colleges.....	11	Apportionment Computations.....	28
Indian Reservations.....	11	Report to the President.....	28
National Parks.....	12	Chapter VI. Editing, Coding, and Tabulating.....	29
Special Local Areas.....	12	Population.....	30
Persons on Vessels.....	12	Editing.....	30
Persons Stationed Abroad.....	12	Coding.....	30
Island Possessions.....	12	General Coding.....	30
Enumeration Districts.....	12	Occupation and Industry Coding.....	31
Chapter III. Organizing for the Field Work.....	13	Punching.....	31
The Field Structure.....	13	Mechanical Recode.....	31
The Field Staff.....	13	Tabulating.....	31
Compensation of Field Personnel.....	15	Family and Fertility Data.....	32
Training.....	15	Housing.....	32
Administrative Training.....	15	Manual Editing.....	32
Technical Training.....	16	Manual Coding.....	32
Setting up the Field Offices.....	17	Punching the H Card.....	32
Space.....	17	Mechanical Editing of H Card.....	32
Furniture, Supplies, and Equipment.....	17	Mechanical Recodes on the H Card.....	32
Payroll and Accounting.....	18	Reproducing Population and Housing Information.....	33
Chapter IV. Collecting the Information.....	19	Tabulations.....	33
The Time Schedule.....	19	Survey of Residential Financing.....	33

	Page		Page
Chapter VI. Editing, Coding, and Tabulating--Con.		Advance Reports	43
Agriculture	33	Number of Inhabitants (P-A Bulletins and Volume I)...	43
General Editing and Coding	34	Characteristics of the Population (P-A, P-B, and P-C bulletins and Volume II)	43
Review of Editing and Coding and Disposition of Problem Cases	34	Census Tract Statistics (P-D Bulletins--Volume III)	43
Arranging, Numbering, and Counting	34	Special Reports (P-E Bulletins--Volume IV)	43
Punching the Agriculture Cards	34	Monographs	43
Mechanical Editing of the Punched Cards	35	Housing	45
Tabulating the Agriculture Data	35	Field Counts	45
Irrigation	35	Preliminary Sample Tabulations	45
Drainage	36	Local Housing Authority Reports	45
Post-Enumeration Survey	36	Advance Reports	45
Mechanical Equipment	36	General Characteristics (H-A Bulletins and Volume I)	45
Preparing Punch Cards	36	Nonfarm Housing Characteristics (H-B Bulletins and Volume II)	45
Arranging the Cards	37	Farm Housing Characteristics (Volume III)	45
Tabulating the Cards	37	Residential Financing (Volume IV)	45
Testing the Machines	38	Block Statistics (H-E Bulletins--Volume V)	45
		Census Tract Statistics (P-D Bulletins)	45
Chapter VII. Publication of the Results	39	Monographs	45
The Publication process	41	Agriculture	45
Reviewing the Tabulations	41	Preliminary Reports	45
Preparing the Tables	41	Counties and State Economic Areas, Volume I	46
Machine Check	41	General Report, Volume II	46
Reviewing Tables	41	Irrigation of Agricultural Lands, Volume III	46
Printing	41	Drainage of Agricultural Lands, Volume IV	46
The Publications	41	Special Reports, Volume V	46
Population	43	Farms and Farm People	46
Field Counts	43	Maps and General Reports	46
Preliminary Tabulations	43		

PART II. THE ITEMS ON THE QUESTIONNAIRES

	Page		Page
Introduction	47	Serial Number and Coverage Question	67
Chapter VIII. Population	47	Block Number	67
Identification Items	47	Type of Living Quarters	68
Heading Items	47	Structure Characteristics	68
Household Identification	48	Type of Structure and Number of Dwelling Units	68
Institutions	48	Business Unit in Structure	68
Relationship and Family Status	49	Condition of Dwelling Unit	68
Relationship	49	Number of Rooms	69
Family Status of Persons	50	Plumbing Facilities	69
Marital Status	50	Equipment, Fuels, and Year Built	70
Current Marital Status	50	Occupancy and Tenure	70
Times Married and Duration of Marital Status	50	Vacant Units	71
General Characteristics	51	Seasonal or Nonseasonal	71
Race	51	Monthly Rent or Value	71
Sex	51	Financial Characteristics of Nonfarm Occupied Units	72
Age	51	Market Value and Mortgage, Owner-Occupied Units	72
Place of Birth and Citizenship	51	Rent and Utilities, Renter-Occupied Units	72
Birthplace of Parents	53		
Migration	54	Chapter X. Agriculture	73
Education	55	Person in Charge, April 1, 1950, and Agricultural Operations (Section I)	73
Labor Force	56	Ownership, Rental Agreement and Location of Land, April 1, 1950 (Section II)	73
Current Employment Status	56	Crops Harvested in 1949 (Section III)	74
Hours Worked During Census Week	58	Land Use in 1949 (Section IV)	75
Duration of Unemployment	58	Year Began Operation, Off-Farm Work, and Other Income in 1949 (Section V)	77
Weeks Worked in 1949	58	Year Began Operation	77
Occupation, Industry, and Class of Worker	59	Off-Farm Work and Other Income	77
Occupational and Industrial Classification Systems	59	Irrigation (Section VI)	77
Instructions to Enumerators	62	Forest Products in 1949 (Section VII)	77
Coding Procedure	62	Pasture Receipts (and Grazing Permits) in 1949 (Section VIII)	78
Machine Tabulation Procedures	62	Livestock on This Place, April 1, 1950, and Livestock Production in 1949 (Section IX)	78
Presentation of Data	63	Sample Items	80
Income	63	Facilities and Equipment (Section X)	80
Definition of Income Concepts	63	Farm Labor Last Week (Section XI)	80
Processing the Income Data	63	Expenditures in 1949 (Section XII)	81
Screening	63	Miscellaneous Information (Section XIII)	81
Coding	63	Work Power	81
Tabulation	63	Economic Class of Farm	81
Veteran Status	64	Type of Farm	82
Families	64		
Fertility	65		
Chapter IX. Housing	67		
Identification of Living Quarters	67		
Sheet Number	67		

APPENDIXES

	Page
Appendix A. Principal Data Collection Forms.....	85
Appendix B. Punch Cards and Summary Outline of Tabulations.....	141
Appendix C. Publications of the 1950 Censuses.....	186
Appendix D. Selected Progress and Cost Tables.....	201
Appendix E. Dates of Principal Activities.....	207
Appendix F. Basic Legislation.....	213
Appendix G. Key Personnel.....	217
Part 1. Bureau of the Census.....	217
Part 2. Advisory Committees for the 1950 Censuses.....	221

List of Text Tables

Table	Page
A. Employment on the 1950 Censuses by Major Organizational Unit, June 1948-December 1952.....	4
B. Pretests of Parts of the 1950 Censuses.....	6
C. Total Number of Field Positions During the 1950 Censuses.....	15
D. Portfolio Types.....	18
E. Machines Used for Punching and Tabulating Operations, 1950 Censuses.....	38
F. Number of Printed Pages in Publications of the 1950 Censuses.....	39
G. Factors Used in Converting Fruit and Nut Quantities From the Units of Measure Enumerated in Specified States to the Units Selected for Showing Them for the United States.....	76
H. Items for Livestock and Livestock Products for Which Data Were Obtained, Census of 1950.....	79

Figure

Figure	Page
15. Reasonable and Acceptable Grades for Each Year of Age.....	55
16. Tabulation of Highest Grade Attended and School Enrollment From Schedule Entries Specified.....	55
17. Tabulation of Highest Grade Completed From Schedule Entries Specified.....	56
18. Employment Status Recode for Persons 14 Years of Age and Over.....	57
19. Relationships Among Condensed, Intermediate, and Detailed Industrial Classification Systems Used in the 1950 Census of Population.....	60
20. Type of Structure Recode.....	69
21. Persons Per Room Recode.....	70
22. Condition and Plumbing Facilities Recode.....	71
23. Questions on Agricultural Operations in Section I of the Agriculture Questionnaire (A1).....	72

Illustrations

Figure	Page
1. Organization of Bureau of Census at the Time of the 1950 Censuses.....	2
2. Area Division.....	13
3. Field Organization and District Office Functions.....	14
4. Training Program Timetable.....	16
5. Filmstrips Used in Training Enumerators in the 1950 Censuses.....	17
6. Persons to Enumerate on the Population Schedule.....	20
7. How to Enumerate Special Types of Living Quarters.....	21
8. Field Reports and Control System.....	22
9. Release Dates of Publications for the 1950 Census of Population.....	40
10. Release Dates of Publications for the 1950 Census of Housing.....	42
11. Release Dates of Publications for the 1950 Census of Agriculture.....	44
12. Age Assignment Chart for General Population Under 14 Years of Age.....	51
13. State Codes.....	52
14. Codes for Foreign Countries.....	53

	Page
Front piece - Public Service Advertisement Prepared by the Advertising Council, Inc. as part of the 1950 Censuses Information Campaign.....	iv
Headquarters of the Bureau of the Census at Suitland, Maryland, a suburb of Washington, D. C.	1
Checking enumerators assignments.....	9
Using aerial photographs to check boundaries.....	11
"Mommie, the Census Taker's Here".....	19
Checking portfolios prior to shipping.....	25
Constitution.....	28
Section of office staff checking results.....	29
Punching the population information using the Richards copyholder.....	31
The Census Multicolumn Sorter, developed for the 1950 Censuses.....	32
The Census recode machine, developed for the 1950 Censuses.....	33
Working on a machine in the Census Machine Development Laboratory.....	35
Univac, which was first used for tabulating part of the 1950 Censuses.....	37
Percent Distribution of Residence of Population by Regions: Census of 1950.....	65
Illustration of Living Quarters.....	66

PREFACE

In a very real sense this report is the product of the work of the 160,000 persons who were associated with the conduct of the 1950 Censuses of Population, Housing and Agriculture. Of necessity it cannot give a detailed account of all the actions that were taken, the reasons they were taken, or the reasons other actions which had been proposed were not taken. Many persons took part in the preparation of the report through supplying memoranda or other accounts of the work actually done, through assembling records which were made at the time, and through the preparation of drafts of sections of the report.

No attempt has been made in this report to evaluate the procedures actually used or to analyze possible alternatives. This is being done in other and more detailed technical reports. The fact that a procedure was adopted for use in the 1950 Censuses cannot be taken as a recommendation for future use, but is presented simply as a record of what was actually done. A great deal of analysis of past experience and current needs went into the development of the procedures in 1950 and similar processes will be used in developing procedures for later censuses.

For some readers the report will appear to be quite general and lacking in the specific detail which would be necessary to carry out a particular operation. Such material was omitted because of its limited interest to most readers, but it does exist in the form of detailed statements of specifications, flow charts, and work procedures, and can be made available to interested persons.

The first seven chapters, which are included in Part I, describe in relatively broad terms how the censuses were taken. Part II includes, in chapters 8 to 10, information on how specific subject items were treated. The appendixes present more detailed information on a number of the subjects treated in the main body of the report.

Since this report is a consolidation of the experience and efforts of many people between 1947 and 1953, it is difficult to give full acknowledgments. Most of the individuals who contributed directly through consultation, memoranda, reports, or first drafts of entire sections are included in Appendix G in the listing of key personnel. The material for this report was assembled and the final draft was prepared in the Office of the Assistant Director for Statistical Standards, by Morris B. Ullman and, during his absence on foreign assignment, by Edwin D. Goldfield. They were assisted by Elva Marquard and Bernard J. Marsh. Nat Grossblat and Nathan Krevor supervised the early stages of assembling material and the preparation of early summaries and drafts. Appendix A, containing the principal data collection forms, has been issued previously, and is still available as a separate bulletin, "Principal Data Collection Forms Used in the 1950 Censuses".